

# Sports Journal

An up-close look at SU athletics

## Husker Busters

Once in a while, a person lives through an experience that seems as if it has changed everything. On even rarer occasions, 47,000 people live through such an experience together.

One of those experiences came to SU on Sept. 29, 1984, when the unheralded Syracuse University Orangemen thoroughly dismantled the almighty and invincible Cornhuskers from Nebraska, then considered the very best collegiate football team in America.

This the Orangemen did by the convincing score of 17-9, in front of a national television audience and a hysterical Carrier Dome crowd—a crowd that included 30-plus members of the 1959 SU squad that had once captured Syracuse's only national football title.

If you could bottle euphoria and sell it at the grocery store, you would have wanted to be at the Dome on Sept. 29 with gallon jugs under each arm. All the emotion that a football program turnaround ought to generate was concentrated there in a single dose.

SU fans of recent years have shared as common attributes not only loyalty and bleacher-brand joviality, but also a considerable measure of cynicism. There have been few SU games played during the past 15 years that promised victory as the Orangemen entered the fourth quarter; SU victories came at the price of one's fingernails.

The cynicism seemed to fade in 1983, when the Orangemen closed their campaign with rousing upsets of Boston College and West Virginia. The 1984 season began with a similar domination of Maryland.

But then SU narrowly avoided a loss to lowly Northwestern (the winning extra point came with no time on the clock) and lost 19-0 the following week to Rutgers. It appeared the Orangemen had recaptured their capacity to disappoint.

Only one thing could make matters worse: the arrival that following Saturday of the University of



*One might have thought they'd won the Super Bowl. When the Orangemen's defeat of top-ranked Nebraska was complete, fans poured onto the Carrier Dome floor. Coach Dick MacPherson (right) joined the celebration.*

Nebraska's "Big Red Machine."

The Cornhuskers were, among other things, undefeated in 23 straight regular season games, unparalleled nationally in total defense, and averaging 40.7 points per game thus far in 1984. The previous year, they had scored an NCAA season-record 624 points, 63 of which had come against SU (who scored only 7 in response). Here in 1984, oddsmakers figured, Syracuse would lose by only 25.

"Most fans came to the game with all the apprehension of a slide into the dentist's chair," wrote Gary Kane of the *Syracuse Herald-American*. "They just hoped it would be as painless as possible."

Nebraska and SU traded punts on their initial possessions (only Nebraska's ninth punt of the year), but on the Cornhuskers' second try quarterback Craig Sundberg took a snap from SU's 25-yard-line, faked a handoff, and then lofted a beautiful arcing pass to loping Todd Frain, a full step ahead of SU defenders Ron Hobby and Vic



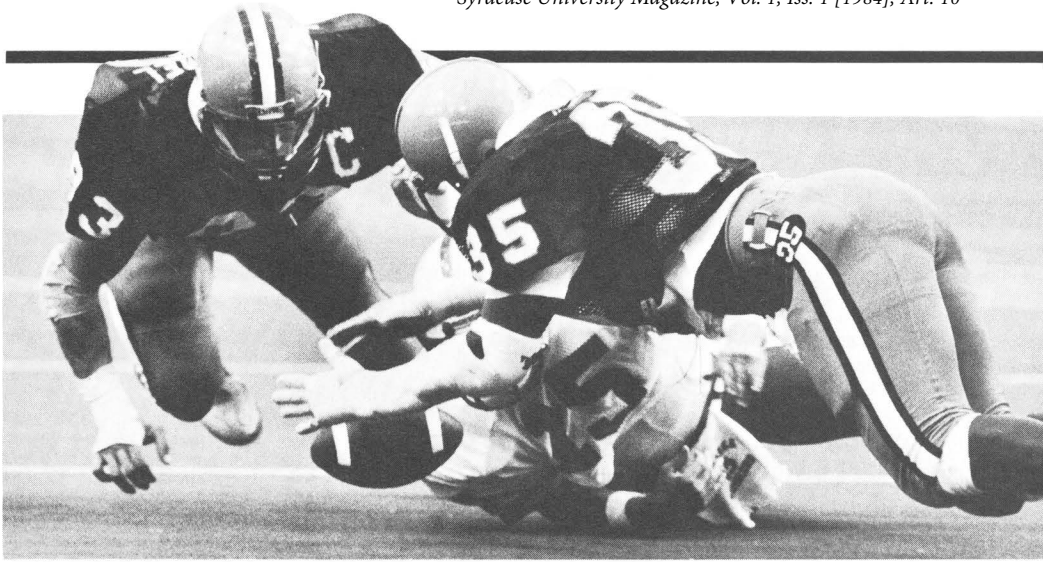
Bellamy.

It's quite possible that scoring a touchdown never seemed so simple, and the SU faithful had no reason to believe that anything other than more of the same lay ahead. In actuality, Nebraska would not score again of its own volition the entire game.

Two possessions later, Nebraska

marched to SU's 14, but All-America candidate Tim Green rushed in from his defensive line post and stripped Sundberg of the ball, and linebacker Rudy Reed recovered. The Orangemen then drove 83 yards before stalling on the Nebraska 3. Sophomore Don McAuley kicked the 24-yard field goal.

"That drive and being down on-



Rudy Reed (35) recovered a first-quarter fumble, one of many big plays for the Orangemen.

ly 7-3 really got our confidence up," running back Jaime Covington later said. "At that point we knew we could sustain a drive with no problem."

It's not likely that many on-lookers shared the team's certainty. Even when, on their next drive, the Cornhuskers were halted again (this time by a Ron Hobby interception), fans were not convinced. Although SU was entering halftime trailing only 7-3, it easily might have been 14-3 or even 21-3.

In the locker room, though, the Orangemen already knew they had the game in hand. "The way they played convinced them," Coach Dick MacPherson said. "Nothing I could say could convince them anymore."

It was during the first two Nebraska possessions of the second half that the skeptics in the crowd were baited for their conversion. First, Nebraska tried a 4th-and-1 play near midfield, and SU's Jeff Knauf punched through the line and leveled the 'Husker back for a one-yard loss.

Then, following another Syracuse punt, Nebraska suffered two massive losses, one a wild pitch-out from Sundberg to back Doug DuBose, and the second a quarterback sack by Tim Green. (Green would finish with three sacks, earning *Sports Illustrated's* weekly defensive trophy.) Nebraska punted from their three.

It was probably then that SU fans began to dare to hope. Lon Dean and Mark Tavern, for example, were working as concession hawkers in the Dome, but spontaneously retired as the second half unfolded.

"I was going to work the whole game," Dean said, "but then I saw that the score was 7-3 and I couldn't take it anymore."

"We quit our jobs to watch the game," Tavern added. "If that ain't fan support, I don't know what is."

SU earned one first down, but then a penalty set them back to Nebraska's 40. What happened next though, on 2nd-down-and-11, completed the reformation of the Carrier Dome crowd. SU quarterback Todd Norley stepped straight back and, defying more conservative strategies, lofted toward the roof a high, floating pass seemingly destined for catastrophe.

As it floated through the soft, synthetic stratosphere of the Dome, on-lookers all but closed their eyes. Those that didn't were fortunate: Wide receiver Mike Siano and two Nebraska defenders, converging at the goal line, leaped to meet the ball. It disappeared among their six outstretched arms and, as if the ball had exploded, Siano and his adversaries parted in three separate directions. Siano was the one blown into the end zone, and Siano was the one with the ball. It was a Syracuse touchdown.

"All I had to do was outrun the guy, jump up, and catch it," Siano later explained. "Todd threw it up there and the rest is history, as they say."

Norley shared Siano's straightforward interpretation of their accomplishment: "I knew all I had to do was put a little air under the ball and he'd be able to get to it."

The red corner of the Dome, where 2,500 Nebraska loyalists sat, was hushed. Even though SU led only 10-7, there was no indication that Nebraska had the potential to

answer back. On this day, a Syracuse lead seemed genuine. Nebraska would, as it turned out, make only three first downs in the third quarter and none in the fourth; in the final period, the Cornhuskers never crossed midfield.

With 7:30 left in the game, SU punted (by now, a routine maneuver in the defensive struggle), but this time flags flew. Nebraska was indicted for one of football's most embarrassing crimes—12 men on the field. As they'd done all day, SU turned the mistake into an opportunity. Assisted by a dramatic third-down, 21-yard pass to receiver Scott Schwedes, the Orangemen spent six minutes marching to Nebraska's one and then, with 1:29 left, full-back Harold Gayden followed lineman Steve Villanti into the end zone.

Syracuse—and the fans—had the breathing room they needed to savor the sweetness. Nebraska punted yet again, and, on the last play of the game, SU punter Jim Fox conceded a safety in order to run out the clock. The game was won.

Statistics reveal how completely Syracuse won this game. SU held the edge in yards gained (224 to 214), first downs (15 to 12), and particularly time of possession (36:45 to 23:15). Nebraska had been held to its lowest point output since the seventh game of its 1981 season. And this was the first time in SU's 95 years of football that the nation's top-rated team was defeated.

"This wasn't a fluke," MacPherson asserted. "Nebraska will say it too."

They did. "Their defense," said 'Huskers head coach Tom Osborne, "played as good a game of football

as anybody had played against us in three or four years."

What really told the story of the game, though, was what happened when the game had ended. At the final gun, fans stormed the field. An army of security guards protected the goal posts, but elsewhere bedlam reigned. MacPherson urged his players to return to the field, and a spontaneous festival ensued. Katz Broadcasting, which was still 20 minutes from sign-off time, beamed image after image of the celebration to a regional television audience.

The following day, the SU hill buzzed and basked in the limelight. Across the country, TV stations replayed highlights, and sports pages retold the drama of a game which *The New York Times* called "one of the biggest and most exciting upsets in recent college football history."

"This has to be one of the biggest ones for us since 1959," said former coach Ben Schwartzwalder, pilot of the national champs.

"It felt great to give these guys a thrill," MacPherson said, referring to the 30-plus members of the 1959 team in attendance. "They were back in the locker room with us. They want so much for us to be back where they put SU."

Gerhard Schwedes, co-captain of the 1959 team, was one of those alumni on hand; his son Scott pulled in the crucial fourth-quarter pass. "This is the first football game I ever cried at," he said. "We picked this game because we knew it was going to be the toughest test. I'm overcome."

"This is the greatest day of our lives," said lineman Doug Marrone.

"It was an unbelievable, euphoric feeling beating the No. 1 team in the country," said Tim Green. "It was just awesome out there."

"Twenty years from now," said former SU running back Jim Nance, "people will be talking about this game."

And, as if in accord, Orangeman Pat Kelly has stashed away a simple souvenir of the day—a grocery store receipt which carries the orange-tinted slogan "Cornhuskers Husked."

"I went out and bought a pack of gum," he said, "just so I could get this to remember this day by. The next day I feel this good will probably be the day I get married."

—Dana L. Cooke